# Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER XVIII

## Martin de Leon
## Victoria County

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MARTIN de Leon made his first trip through Texas, in 1805, stopping in San Antonio and passing through La Bahia, the present town of Goliad, en route to Nacogdoches. He was fascinated by the inexpressible beauty of the country; with its grass-covered prairies through which peeped countless wild flowers of all colors; and through which the winding rivers, fed by various tributaries, flowed to the sea.

Innumerable herds of deer, buffalo and antelope grazed on grass four to six feet high. Thousands of mustangs—descendants of pure Andalusian horses, strayed from their Spanish masters—browsed in freedom, absolute strangers to curb or saddle. This country was a dream come true! Pasture land! Farm land! Plenty for himself, his children. There was a demand in New Orleans and the markets in Mexico for everything that could be produced in this glorious country. And a hunter's paradise. This was a real opportunity to indulge in his love for hunting!

The sultry summer months would be tempered by the refreshing sea breezes; and less unpleasantness from the heat would be experienced than from the higher altitudes. Sunstrokes were unknown, and there was no hydrophobia among the dogs. The winters were mild and brief. Corn could be planted in February. Sugar cane could be grown easily; he believed, in time, that cotton could be developed as a profitable crop.

His parents came from Spain to Mexico and settled in the province of Nuevo Santander, now the State of Tamaulipas. He received what education he considered would fit him for business, and declined to pursue further study in Monterrey, much to the disappointment of his parents.

Home of Alfonso de Leon, near the original house of Felix de Leon, great grandson of Don Martin de Leon. His wife, Satane, is also a great granddaughter of the empresario.

Eager to launch into a business of his own Martin de Leon began with a drove of pack mules which he loaded with provisions and other supplies and sold them to the miners of Real de San Nicolas. When twenty years of age he joined the regiment, *Fiels de Burgos*, organized by the Viceroy of Mexico to repel the Indian incursions that were becoming more frequent. Because of his soldierly qualities he rose by promotion to the rank of captain, above which no native was allowed to go, however meritorious he might be.

He had married Dona Patricia de la Garza, at Soto la Marina in 1796. She was beautiful, well educated, cultured and refined, a young woman of an aristocratic Mexican family which dated its ancestry to high Spanish blood in Spain. She, too, loved the beauty of the outdoors, and the adventure of pioneering. She shared her husband's love for planting a colony; of establishing a community in a new and unconquered wilderness.

So they loaded their carts with household goods needed for living in temporary homes, bringing their servants and only child, Fernando de Leon. They came slowly overland and settled on the east bank of the Aransas River, just below where the road to San Patricio crosses that stream.

Desiring to make a permanent settlement he petitioned the Spanish Governor at San Antonio in 1807 for a tract of land lying between the Aransas River and Cheltipin Creek where he soon enclosed a pasture of several leagues of land, and domesticated the wild mustangs he had captured on the prairies. But the petition was not granted. Two years later he tried again and received a similar result. He then removed from the Aransas to the eastern bank of the Nueces River, where he enclosed another pasture just below the site of the present town of San Patricio. Because of a revolutionary movement started by a patriot priest, Hidalgo, the troops had to be moved from the presidios to protect the interior. The Lipans and the Comanches became more hostile and more intolerable. There was never a safe moment for the de Leons. So after many hardships and "hair breadth escapes" they moved to San Antonio for protection. While living there de Leon coöperated with the Republicans in all their efforts directed against the Royal power.

The children were growing up. Don Martin and Madam de Leon decided to make a long visit to their parents in Burgos Cruillas. It was good to be back again, and to visit with relatives and friends. But Texas was home, and they were glad to start back.

He devoted much of his time to seeing after his cattle which now numbered about five thousand head. His handsome horses and large droves of mules were known far and near. Every year he sold mules, horses, and cattle at New Orleans for a handsome profit. The wagon trains returned heavily laden with supplies for his family and helpers on the ranch.

While in New Orleans the year after Mexico gained her independence he met Carlos Lazo aboard a piratical craft commanded by a Frenchman named Ramon Lafou. Don Martin chartered this vessel and promised Lafou that he would obtain for him pardon from the Mexican Government. The cargo was soon placed on board and sail set for the mouth of the Rio Grande. Arriving at Brazos de Santiago, near Matamoras, Don Martin left his son Felix on board as an assurance to Lafou of his good faith, and went ashore to arrange for his friend's pardon. Thanks to the influence of his friends Don Pedro Jose de la Garza, chief quartermaster at Padilla, the then capital of the state, and General Don Felix de la Garza, commanding in Tamaulipas, the pardon was secured.

Don Martin de Leon took this opportunity to again request permission to plant a colony in Texas. This time his

CANDELARIA DE LEON ALDRETE
Daughter of Don Martin de Leon and the last surviving child of the empresario.

ISMAEL ALDRETE
Grandson of Martin de Leon, who is said to have resembled the empresario very much. He was the son of Don Martin's daughter, Candelaria de Leon Aldrete.

friends were enthusiastic and warmly endorsed his petition for a grant as *empresario* of a colony in Texas. He received full authority in 1824 to occupy any vacant lands he should choose for 41 colonists named in the grant.

His long cherished wish had been granted! But, he lacked the necessary funds to carry out his plans. Madam de Leon's father, Jose Angel Garza, had died recently and left her $9,800. She passed that money on to her husband. She had also received from her father $300 worth of cows, horses and mules which could be brought along also.

She shared her husband's joy and enthusiasm for the establishing of a new colony in the "Wilds of Texas." She, too, knew something of the life that was to come. Some of her children had been born during those harrowing days when they lived on the banks of the Aransas, in continuous fear of being attacked by the Indians. Fernando de Leon had been born in 1798 before they left Mexico; the others were native-born Texans. Candelaria de Leon was born in 1800; Silvestre de Leon, 1802; Guadalupe de Leon, 1804; Felix de Leon, 1806; Agapite de Leon, 1808; Maria Jesus de Leon, 1810; Refugio de Leon, 1812; Augustina de Leon, 1814; Francisca de Leon, 1818.

The youngest child was now six years old, and they all loved the freedom and thrill of pioneer life. Really, it was the only life they knew. The older ones had received most of their education from their mother. As each showed ability in certain subjects that child, in turn, taught the younger ones. The older boys had received excellent business training from their father and were capable of helping him in managing the affairs of the colony, and also in developing their own business interests. The family worked and played together happily and harmoniously. Each had much respect and admiration for the ability of the other.

### Each Settler Given Land

According to Victor Rose's history of Victoria county published in 1883, Don Martin de Leon's first contract gave him the right to introduce 41 families into the colony; which he did, often furnishing pecuniary aid from his private resources. On their arrival, upon petition in writing to the commissioner, each settler received one league of land, in which was included one labor, or 177 acres of arable land; each colonist also received a building lot in town, the commissioner issuing titles to both after being properly surveyed; field notes, and plat accompanying each title. When the stipulated number of families had settled, the *empresario* was to receive five leagues of land as premium. The general boundaries of the de Leon colony were: the Coleto on the west, Mission Valley on the north, Lavaca River on the east; and Matagorda Bay on the south.

Finally, in 1824, the family, with their servants and the 41 colonists loaded their household goods and other equipment on carts and started out happily on the long, slow, dangerous journey to build homes in a new country.

They were to build houses on their lots in order to live close together for better protection from the Indians. Don Martin plotted his settlement on the banks of the Guadalupe River, formerly known as Cypress Grove, and called it "Guadalupe Victoria" in honor of the first President of Mexico, who was a warm personal friend of his. The Guadalupe River had been named previously, as a testimonial of respect for the Patron Saint of Mexico. The main street was called *Ca le de Los*, on the "Street of Ten Friends." Perhaps it meant the union of the ten principal citizens who directed the matters of policy and defense against the Indians and general welfare of the community.

Houses were constructed as rapidly as possible. A primitive style of architecture naturally prevailed at first. The houses, adobe type, were known as *jacals*, and were only temporary, containing dirt floors. Later more pretentious houses of hand-hewn logs were built.

Martin de Leon's house was built on the present site of St. Mary's Church and Nazareth Convent. Later he built a house of hand-hewn logs near the Guadalupe River on his ranch and near the mission, nine miles from Victoria. The first house had one big room with a large chimney, a ten-foot hall and a small room across the back. Two other rooms were added later.

While the *empresario* and his sons were busy with the management of the affairs of the colonists, Madam de Leon managed the home on the ranch and in town with the dignity and charm that characterizes a woman of culture and good breeding. Indeed, she transplanted the seed of culture and aristocracy of old Mexico into the wilderness so deeply that it became the embryo of the seat of culture in that section of the State.


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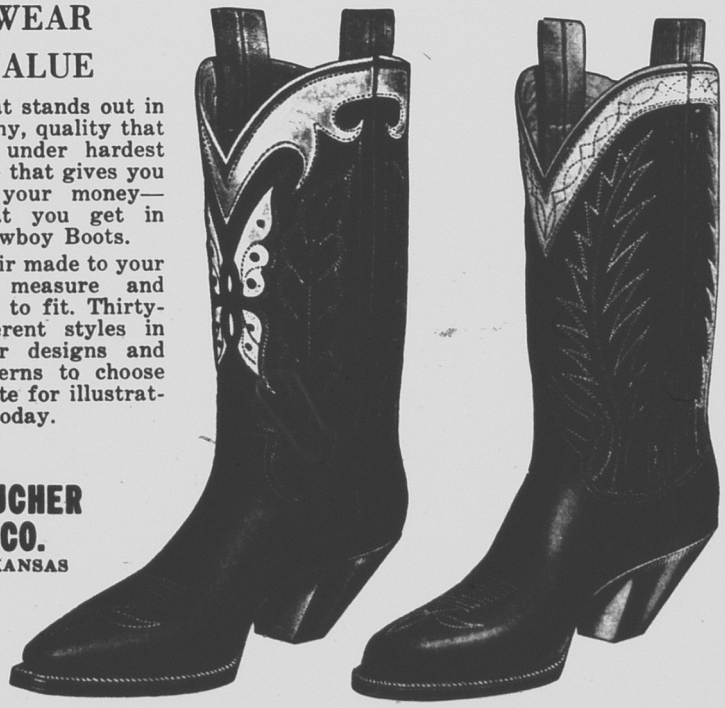

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Her beautiful furniture was placed in the log houses on dirt floors. Servants were directed in the same efficient manner as when she lived in the more pretentious surroundings of her early youth.

There was an abundance of food, though very simple. Beans, corn, and potatoes were raised on the ranch. Fresh meat—venison, beef and pork—was always available. Fresh-water and salt-water fish were obtainable from the rivers and bay when she wanted it. Tender nettles and polk weeds were used as greens during the warm months. Molasses, and *peloncio*, or candy, were made from home grown sugar cane. *Tortillas* were made from meal ground on the *matate*. *Frijoles* and the Mexican national dish, *chili con carne*, were favorites. Coffee was served without sugar or cream.

They cut meat into strings and let it dry and packed it in sacks to take with them on long trips—New Orleans and Mexico. The meat was broiled on the coals, then cooked into hash.

Rich materials for clothing were secured from New Orleans, but each garment was hand-made by Madam de Leon and her daughters. They were noted for their beautiful embroidery.

School was established almost immediately, and taught by Placido Benavides, and later by Francisco Cardenas.

Meanwhile the *empresario*, his sons and the colonists were delighted to find there were at least four divisions of black "crawfish" or "hog wallo prairie"; the "handy upland prairie"; the "river bottom" and the "river valley" lands. A variety of crops could be grown on the fertile soil of the upland prairies and the river bottoms. All would provide excellent pasturage for livestock. Cattle and horses were to be their main interests. There were already a large number of wild cattle and mustangs roving through the deep grass of the prairies. He could catch them by making a corral, an enclosure of limbs and posts, as he had done on the Aransas and the Nueces. He had made one such fence three miles in length, and it could be done easily here. Forty bushels of corn to the acre were gathered, so there was no reason why he should not increase the number of horses. He loved the novelty and excitement of attending to his cattle interests.

**Present Roundup Called "Rodeo"**

Ever so often they would have a *rodeo*, or round-up of the cattle. The plan was to have one herding ground on the ranch. The cattle soon learned to run together at that place when they saw the *vaqueros* on the wing, and when those on the outskirts started the movement became general. And no prettier sight, or one more interesting, can be imagined than a *rodeo* in full progress. Every cow caught the alarm and would start off at a brisk trot headed for the herding ground, not by a circuitous route, but across the hills and valleys, and converging as they proceed to the point of destination. The wildest and strongest always took the lead, but they all had the same spirit, to get there as soon as possible. The *vaqueros* followed to hurry up the stragglers. And when the round-up was made, whatever may have been the purpose of the drive—whether to cut out and deliver beef cattle, brand calves, or merely to take out and doctor such as had wounds from the blow flies—the cattle wanted were cut out and taken to the pen and the herd dissolved itself again and scattered over the range.

With the horses a different system prevailed. Horses stock were kept in *remudas;* that is, saddle horses with one bell mare. Mares and young stock were kept in the *manada*. The horse became very much attached to his harem and would allow them to scatter. After a number of *manadas* had been thrown together, when turned loose it was wonderful to see these horses separating and collecting their several households together. They knew every animal of their group as well as the owner, and were exceedingly vicious to a reluctant member of the family. These prairie stallions often met in stubborn conflict and fought for hours for mastery. Don Martin de Leon and his family loved every phase of it.

Apparently there were no worries. The markets were steady; so they responded to the daily joys and accepted the daily dangers as a part of the natural procedure.

The sons of Don Martin settled principally on Matagorda Bay, between the Zorillo and Arenoso creeks, on the latter his stock ranch was situated. The colonists chose locations for their perma-


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nent settlement on the Coleto, the Guadalupe, the Zorilla, or Placido, as it is now more commonly called; the Garcitas, Arenoso, and Lavaca River, to the bay.

But always he was constantly on the watch for the wild and treacherous Indians. His long years of experience in dealing with them enabled him now to predict with almost certain accuracy the times propitious for their raids. He was so well acquainted with their methods of warfare that he was never surprised by them. He anticipated their movements.

### Got Along With Indians

In one of his campaigns he had a small cannon strapped to the back of a mule, ready loaded in case of emergency, when unexpectedly appeared a Comanche scouting party. The man who had the mule in charge hastily applied the fuse and the piece was discharged, to the consternation of the Indians, who had a superstitious horror of manufactured thunder, but, the rebound broke the poor mule's back. Upon one occasion the Carancahua Indians came to his ranch on the Garcitas, in a warlike manner, while only he, his wife, and two servants were about the place. Seeing that they were painted red, the emblem of war, he planted his cannon at the door, Madam de Leon was to apply the match to it in case of need, the two servants were posted at convenient port holes, guns in hand, and he himself seizing his rifle, took a position just outside. This warlike display, and especially the big gun, intimidated the warriors and the chief made signs for a friendly consultation, which resulted in de Leon giving them a beef for their dinner, and other presents such as blankets, etc., in token of the recent treaty of amity and peace. They called him *Captain Vaca Mucha*, or *Plenty of Cows*, because he frequently fed them beef when they came on raids. Sometimes he killed as many as five at a time. When the Indians came he raised the white flag, then butchered the cows. Naturally, he had very little trouble with them. When they came to fight he would raise the white flag, give them plenty of whiskey, and butcher meat for them to eat and let them dance. When they were dead drunk he would slip out whoever he was hiding. Many emigrants traveling through the country from Indianola came to him for protection. He would have them lie down on the earth, stretch hides tightly over them and cover them with moss. After the Indians became dead drunk he would slip them out and start them on their journey. He would have them tie the oxens' tongues to the yoke so they could not eat or scatter slobber on the way. In that way there were no traces left for the Indians to follow. He and Madam de Leon always welcomed the travelers and no one was allowed to pay for services rendered by them.

Since there were more goods and more products raised than money, Don Martin de Leon worked out a system of paying his help. Each helper received so much in cash, and so much in goods or produce on a monthly basis. Carrying these practices over into his own family, each child was paid for his work in cash, and in property, livestock and real estate. Mrs. Alfonso de Leon of Mission Valley has in her possession the record books which show that entries were made for each of the children. One trip to New Orleans showed the following purchases were made and charged to the account of each child concerned, and is typical of the other accounts (these were purchased for Dona Guadalupe, and charged to her account):

*1 silk dress, $12.00.*
*1 silk dress, purple, $12.00.*
*1 silk dress, blue, $12.00.*
*1 demse donana, or yellow dress, $12.00.*
*1 Peineta, or Spanish comb with stones, $9.50.*
*1 pair gold earrings, $29.00.*
*1 gold chain with a locket to hold a picture, $3.00.*
*1 "Panuella", or mantilla—lace shawl, purple, $3.00.*
*1 Spanish shawl, silk, purple, $6.00.*

Another account shows where he gave her two cows with six calves, and six increases, valued at $33.00. He prom-


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ised her when she married he would give her a house and lot in town worth $800.00.

Purchased and charged to Felix, evidently after he married:

*1 matate, $3.00.*
*1 "Comal," a round smooth piece of steel on which to cook tortillas, $20.00.*
*1 "Peineta," or Spanish comb for his wife, $6.00.*
*1 silk dress, $10.00.*
*1 Spanish silk shawl, $10.00.*
*2 pair hose, lace, $2.00.*
*1 cotton shawl, $2.00.*
*1 silk handkerchief, "mascado," to wear around the neck, $2.00.*
*1 Winchester, $12.00.*
*1 sword. "sable," $9.00.*

Another entry he charged to Felix's account was:

*3 horses and saddles, $20.00 each.*
*1 manada of 29 mares and 3 two-yr. old mules, $29.00 each, also 1 jack stallion.*
*100 steers, $19.00 each.*
*2 Jennys.*

They bought the finest materials available, and prided themselves on doing very fine sewing. The rich silk dresses, made with full skirts, almost stood alone without the support of the many ruffled petticoats. Each ruffle was handsomely embroidered and each costume enhanced by costly jewels that are precious heirlooms of their descendants today. They were beautiful, charming Spanish girls and had received the best educational opportunities of the time. The sons were tall, graceful, well-proportioned men. And as the *empresario* prospered he delighted in providing for his family all the conveniences and comforts available.

The de Leon house was probably the most handsomely furnished home in the community. It was recognized as the cultural center. Now they travelled in royal style in a magnificent coach or carriage drawn by a good looking span of horses ornamented with gold trappings.

### A Religious Family

The de Leons were devout Catholics. There was no permanent priest in the colony at first, but the *empresario* arranged for divine services to be conducted alternately by Father Valdez of La Bahia, Father Diaz of Nacogdoches, and Father Murea of San Antonio. But soon a church was built on the lot set aside for that purpose, and a regular priest was secured.

The colonists had brought with them their musical instruments—fiddle, guitar, and accordion—and many happy hours were spent dancing the Polka, two-step, and early Spanish dances on the ground in the open market square.

Weddings were occasions for great celebrations. The first marriage in the little church was that of Don Desiderio Garcia to Dona Guadalupe de Leon, which occurred shortly after the establishment of the colony. The second was that of Felix to Dona Salome Leal four years later. Both of these marriages were marked by great feasts and dances.

As the children married they settled in the little community and gradually assumed greater responsibilities in the management of public affairs. The de Leon men had the greatest admiration and respect for each other as business men. They prided themselves on dealing with each other as men—not as members of a family.

Martin de Leon was proud of his sons as busines men and they held responsible positions in the management of the colony. The following story is taken from "The Reminiscences" of John J. Linn, which was printed in the Victoria Advocate:

"Sylvestre, the third child of Don Martin de Leon was an alcalde of the colony. Upon one occasion a poor man complained to the alcalde that Martin de Leon had wilfully killed his hog. When court opened Don Martin de Leon was summoned. The alcalde stated the case.

"Don Martin acknowledged killing the hog, but justified the act on the ground that the hog had destroyed his garden. The alcalde asked if he had a 'lawful fence.'

"The old gentleman replied that it was not the best, but asked if he would give judgment against his father. Don Sylvestre replied that in his capacity of a public officer the ties that bound him as an individual were inoperative. On the bench he would perform his duty with


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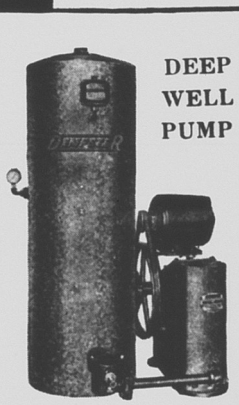


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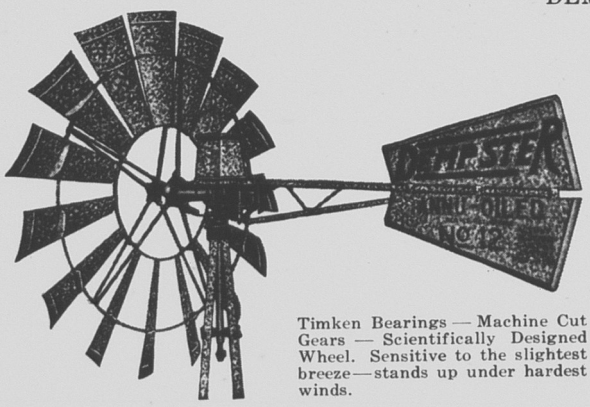

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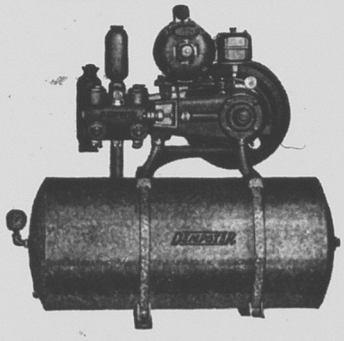

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strict impartiality, but off the bench he would become again the dutiful son. With this prelude the alcalde announced that he would assess the damages sustained by the plaintiff in the loss of his hog at twenty dollars.

"Don Martin promptly paid the amount, with the remark that he was proud of such a son, to the disappointment of a crowd that had collected to see some fun."

So the years sped happily away. One hundred and fifty more colonists had arrived from Mexico, and were doing well on their ranches. The *empresario* began dreaming of expanding every phase of work. The property in the little settlement was worth about one million dollars. At least half of it belong to him and his children. And he had only started. His sons and sons-in-law were real helpers, and they, too, were training their children. Many of his grandchildren were being educated in Paris, Madrid, London, and other capitals of Europe.

Because of the great prominence of the family in Mexican affairs they were being received in the royal courts, and becoming acquainted with the most noted rulers of Europe of that time. The family spent many happy hours looking at the personally autographed pictures of prominent people among the Royal Courts of Europe, all of which bore the imprints of London and Paris photographers, and listening to the stories the returned school boy told about them.

Yes, the de Leon family is the greatest family in Texas, thought the *empresario*. They loved the association with each other, and with a few of the other colonists whom they considered their equal. But, for the most part, the de Leon children married their cousins whom they felt were their equals. They were a proud, superior, aristocratic and happy Mexican family which had transplanted the culture of a proud race, and maintained the customs of Mexico in the pioneer town of Victoria on the Guadalupe during the nine happy years since its establishment. The de Leon holdings were increasing in size and value. Great numbers of cattle, horses and mules grazed on the ranches, which were growing bigger each year. Sales grew in volume.

And while the ranching industry would always be uppermost in his mind, Don Martin thought he could trust the greater part of the management to his sons whom he had trained so well. So he began to dream of making Victoria a great city. It would grow, he planned around a magnificent cathedral, rivaling the greatest churches in Mexico. Finally the sketches and estimates were completed. He was ready to bring architects, engineers and masons up from Mexico, when cholera struck his community in 1833. And he was the first victim.

Thus he died as he had lived—a Christian man, thinking first of his family and his colonists for whom he was responsible. He was buried under the church he had erected, and on the ground he had given for the church, and the people mourned him as a great leader, a true friend.

With a broken heart, but head held high, like the truly aristocrat she was, Madam de Leon resigned herself to spend the remaining years of her life in the country where she and her husband had spent so many happy years. She devoted more and more of her time to the welfare of the church.

### War Caused Suffering

But Texas was struggling to gain its independence from Mexico. She and her children sided with the Texans. Her sons and grandsons fought in the Texas army. They were loyal, and gave liberally of their means to help achieve its independence. But after the battle of San Jacinto, and almost overnight, Victoria was changed from a quiet Mexican town to an Anglo-American town dominated by an army that distrusted and hated the Mexicans simply because they were Mexicans.

During the war when the Mexican army had remained in Victoria, Don Fernando de Leon, one of the sons, had been forced by the Mexican officers to point out corn, beeves, horses, and other property required by the army. Another time he was forced by a Mexican officer under guard to lead the way to Dimmit's Landing where they seized some goods. Many times he and his brothers and brothers-in-law were forced to assist the Mexicans in securing goods required by the invading army. So they were hated and distrusted by many of the newer citizens; they became the victims of warring forces. It was no longer safe for them to remain in the community they had helped build.

With heavy heart Madam de Leon, under the protection of her son-in-law, Placido Benavides, and his family, left the Republic of Texas for Mexico. Placido Benavides died in Opelousas, Louisiana. Accompanied by the Carabajal family, they proceeded to New Orleans where for three years they lived in abject poverty. The women earned a little money by doing fine sewing. They finally arrived in Soto La Marina, Madam de Leon's childhood community, but everything was changed. It was no longer home. Shortly after their arrival Madam Augustine de Leon Benavides died, just five years after her husband's death.

Madam Martin de Leon longed to return to Texas. Finally in 1844, accompanied by her grandchildren of the Benavides family she returned to Texas. But the patriarchal herds were gone. Most of the property had been seized for one reason or another. But it was still the place she longed to be. She devoted much of her time to the church. She had given the valuable golden altar vessels, including a "golden relicary in which the consecrated Host is manifest for public veneration."

But, now, her life here was so different. The vast herds of the de Leon's had melted away before the inroads of thieves and of honest people who really thought they were wild herds. Her children and other relatives had been ostracized from the land of their adoption and birth because of their supposed Mexican sympathies. Some of them had been imprisoned without just cause; some of them had been murdered. And while the grandchildren retrieved some of the former de Leon property, it was a mere pittance in comparison with the princely holdings that had been theirs. But neither she, nor her children complained. And after a few years she, too, passed away, and was buried beside her husband in Victoria.

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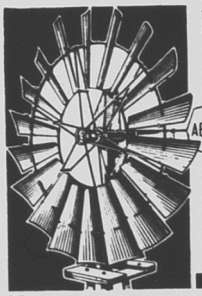


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